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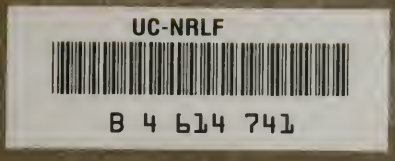

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WILL CARLETON

By BYRON A. FINNEY
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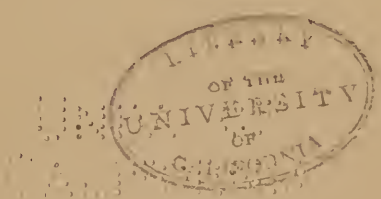
Revised from *Michigan Historical Collections*, vol. 39, and reprinted from the *Michigan History Magazine* for October, 1917



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Will Carleton, Michigan's Poet[1]

By a Boyhood Friend, Byron A. Finney
Ann Arbor

WILL CARLETON, whose writings have for many years endeared him to the people of this State as Michigan's representative poet, was born October 21, 1845, on the sixty-acre farm where the old homestead still stands, two miles east of the village of Hudson, Lenawee County, near the southern boundary of the State, on the line of the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad.

Mr. Carleton's parents, John Hancock and Celestia E. Smith Carleton, were pioneer settlers in Hudson Township. His ancestry was English, through New Hampshire. In their religious opinions both Mr. and Mrs. Carleton were ardent Methodists, and Mr. Carleton was class-leader in the village Methodist Episcopal church for many years, until his death in 1872 at the age of seventy. He was a man of sterling probity, somewhat austere in manner, much liked and respected in the community.

Young Will grew up in the strictness of the faith, but became quite liberal in after years. From the time of his marriage in 1882 he was more associated with the Free Will Baptist denomination, in the missionary work of which Mrs. Carleton was quite active. He was one of the Trustees of the college of that denomination at Hillsdale from 1887 until his death.

The writer of the present paper has had some special opportunity for this task—though for him it is not a task—for he grew up with Carleton as a boyhood and school companion, and the intimacy of friendship was only interrupted through

[1]A paper read at the midwinter meeting of the Michigan State Pioneer and Historical Society at Port Huron, February 6, 1914. Reprinted from Vol. 39 of the *Michigan Historical Collections*.

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his whole lifetime by the varying circumstances of separated occupations and residence.

By the marriage of Will's elder sister, Mary Ann, to my uncle, Addison N. Kidder, of Hudson, we boys were thrown into close relationship from the time when he was thirteen years of age and I was ten.

My home was in the village and his was the old homestead, two miles directly east of Hudson, and in the interchange of our boyish visits I slept many a night with him in the old house out of which "Nancy" moved "into the new." The "old" was a log house, which became a wing when the frame upright was built. The log wing was afterward replaced by a frame one, as it stands today.

This comradeship was kept up during our school life in the village of Hudson to which he was in the habit of walking daily to school in good weather, the round trip from the schoolhouse making about five miles a day. Until he passed the grade of instruction which it gave he went to the school on the east side of the village, which was nearer his home. During the winter of 1862-3 he roomed during the school days of the week at the home of an elder sister, Almira (Mrs. Heman Goodrich), near the Union school on the west side. There many an evening did I study with him and help him in his Latin which I had begun before him. Another schoolmate, Alonzo B. Bragdon, who has been a practicing attorney in Monroe for many years and is now city attorney under the new commission, took turns with me, in this same pleasure.

Carleton went to Hillsdale, in 1862; then went out to teach, returning to college in 1865. I followed, entered there in the fall of the same year. We were always chums and during the second year roomed together in the west wing of the college building, which, above the first floor, was a dormitory for men students. During this period, when he was not studying, writing or blowing a horn (he organized and led the college band, and played the E-b cornet, and played it strong, too), he was practicing his poetry on me. I didn't hesitate to criticize

WILL CARLETON

Taken in his old home near Hudson, Michigan, on his birthday, October 26, 1902, during the Carleton Home-coming.

it either, but found out afterwards that he was working me for that frank criticism.

As there has been some question as to the date when Carleton first went to Hillsdale College, I will quote from a letter of his to Mr. Bragdon, under date of August 18, 1910:

"Yes, I entered Hillsdale in '65, and graduated in '69. My 'preparation' was a fragmentary and tempestuous one—full of fights, follies, frolics and phantasies—but with a steady determination under them all, to 'get there.' I read every book I could buy or borrow, believed what I wanted of them, laughed at the rest, and went on 'swimming through the dew-drops.' I saw a good deal of Finney, and was diverted from solider pursuits by his confounded dramatic hunches, which, however, did me a lot of good afterward. I fell in and associated with you—which was an education in itself..."

The poems which Carleton had written during his college course and shortly after were gathered into a small volume and published by the Lakeside Publishing Company, Chicago, in 1871. They attracted little attention; not so much, perhaps, as one which had not been included in the volume. This was a political, satirical poem, which was delivered by its author at Republican mass-meetings during the Presidential campaign of 1868. It was quite popular, and was published in pamphlet form under the title, "Fax."

While in school Carleton had been contributing items and "write-up" notices to the newspapers, with the fixed idea of taking up journalism for a life work, and during the first three years after graduation he was connected with the *Western Rural*, Chicago, the Hillsdale *Standard*, and the Detroit *Weekly Tribune*. It was during this time, early in 1871, that his poem "Betsey and I Are Out" appeared in the Toledo *Blade*.[1]

It was copied all over the country and attracted the notice of the New York publishers, Harper & Brothers, who gave it a prominent page, with illustration, in *Harper's Weekly*.[2] They

[1]March 17, 1871.
[2]May 27, 1871.

followed this with several other of his poems, taken from the Detroit *Tribune,* or written for *Harper's Weekly,* under the series title of "Farm Ballads." This was the beginning of their popular volumes of his "Ballads," "Legends," and "Festivals."

From this period Carleton devoted himself to authorship and the lecture platform, and became known to the country at large, as well as to Michigan, as the poet-spokesman of the farmer and the everyday citizen. He could not resist entirely the journalistic call, and in 1894 established a family magazine, *Every Where,* published monthly in Brooklyn, N. Y., and which he conducted for nearly twenty years, until his death.[3] To this magazine he contributed many prose articles, and a poem regularly to each issue.

Of his early period of aspiration Mr. Carleton gives some interesting reminiscences, in an article which he contributed to *Lippincott's Magazine* for April 1887 (39:670-6), entitled "Experiences of a Public Lecturer," from which I quote:

"My lecturing efforts began at home, upon my father's farm. Having succeeded in hearing two or three good speakers who had visited our little neighboring village, I decided straightway that forensic effort was to be part of my life-business. So the sheep and cattle were obliged to hear various emotional opinions on subjects of more or less importance, and our steeds of the plough enjoyed a great many comfortable rests between furrows in order to 'assist' at my oratorical displays. One of them persisted in always going to sleep before the discourse was finished—a custom that is not obsolete even among his human superiors.

"The first lecture-course of this series came to an end quite suddenly; for my shrewd, hard-headed New-England father began to suspect that agriculture was being sacrificed to eloquence. So he appeared unexpectedly in the audience during a *matinee,* and told me he had heard most of the harangue, and that he feared I was spoiling a tolerably good farmer to become an intolerably bad orator. Though of a kindly, generous dis-

[3]Dec. 18, 1912.

position, he could throw into his less gracious words a great deal of sarcasm to the square inch, and the lecturer of the afternoon, crushed but not convinced, wakened the off-horse and thoughtfully drove his plough towards the blue woods at the other end of the furrow.

"It is a pleasant memory that my father lived to see me earning a hundred dollars a night and admitted, with a grave twinkle in his eye, that, having looked the matter over from a non-agricultural stand-point, he had concluded there was more in me than he had supposed.

"But in those boy-days both lecturing and literature developed very slowly. How was I to get audiences, either for pen or voice?...There seemed little hope for a beginner.

"But the great secret of commencing is to *commence where one can*. During my course in college it appeared that several small towns in the country which could not afford expensive lectures wanted and would pay for something to amuse them for an evening; that there existed among these people a class who were tired of burnt-cork and sleight-of-hand shows, and wanted something which professed to be intellectual; and so I 'did' all the neighboring hamlets that I could induce to hear me. The financial advantage was not bewildering, and generally consisted of half the net proceeds. After the door-keeper had his percentage, and the sexton his guerdon, and the printer his dues, and the bill-poster his back-pay, the half of what was left was almost as much as the whole of it (although even then perhaps worth as much as the entertainment).

"But the practice of meeting audiences of all descriptions has proved invaluable ever since. Declaiming upon the sea-shore would have been a tender, mild sort of discipline compared to it. Mothers brought their babies, and they competed with me for a hearing; coughs and sneezes and clearings of husky throats were seldom suppressed; and most of the cheering, if done at all, came from the leather-clad palm of the foot, rather than from the softly sonorous surface of the hand.

But these country-people had as good hearts and as healthy brains as can be found in city or university, and I always went away in love with my audience. 'You have let considerable light into this district,' said one bright-eyed farmer boy; 'and you've started me on the up-track.' My payment for that evening's work was five dollars and a half in money, and a compliment estimated at, at least, a million dollars. The rough, homespun fellow who gave it may not read this, for he has gone on into the Great Unknown; but he holds an earthly residence in at least one heart.

"My resources from the platform slowly increased, and finally resulted in enough to pay a fair portion of the expenses of a college course. Soon after graduation, I began to receive calls from various towns in the State, which were becoming acquainted with me through my literary work. This soon extended to adjoining states, and so all over this country and England, and gave me some very interesting experiences, and many first-class exhibits of human nature."

President J. W. Mauck, of Hillsdale College, who knew Carleton well for so many years, expressed the following appreciation of him in the *Collegian,* the Hillsdale College semi-monthly magazine, for January 9, 1913:

"We best knew him as Will Carleton. Few ever heard his second name, McKendree—from the bishop of the Methodist church, given to him by the parents of whose genuine faith and life he has spoken in tender filial terms in the writer's presence. His graduating part in June, 1869, was a poem (Rifts in the Cloud), whose merit President Fairfield attested by seizing a bouquet from the platform and throwing it to the young poet after he had taken his place with his class.... He was long a trustee of the college, a member of the board when he died, and although he could not regularly attend its meetings, he took a lively interest in its proceedings and in all things that concerned the institution. He was wont to express his gratitude to the college which, he said, had befriended him

at a time when he could not have gone far from home, and made possible for him a better and more fruitful career.

"He was married March 2, 1882, to Adora Niles Goodell, a charming woman who had served with the highest efficiency as a Christian missionary in Burmah and was compelled by impaired health to return home. During her several visits to the college she won the hearty esteem of all who met her. They lived most happily until separated by death in a peculiarly sad and sudden way. He had returned from a lecture tour and they were unusually buoyant at dinner. She went to her room to prepare to go with him to a lecture when, attracted by a fall, he hurried to her just as she expired from apoplexy. Mrs. Carleton was the founder of one of the well-known missionary bands of young women, and Mr. Carleton liberally supported it both before and after her death. In a measure known to few, hospitals, homes for the needy and unfortunate individuals found in him a generous benefactor in material aid, bestowed in a simple way, and enriched by an almost prodigal use of his time in personal calls and entertainments. In such service he contributed as much in the current flow of life as others who have become more widely known by one or a few of the more conspicuous gifts. A larger part of his somewhat liberal income went into such channels than the public knew.... Mr. Carleton did in effect 'dip his pen in his own heart and wrote of the hopes and the loves and the tears' of humanity. He voiced with fidelity the homely sentiments which are common to all, but which few can express, and he ennobled those emotions which are more vital than the most finished literary forms or highest intellectual reaches. He stirred the springs of the saner emotions, inspired men to better resolves and shamed them for their foibles and pretences."

Carrying out the idea of President Mauck, of Hillsdale College, it was arranged that Mr. Carleton should be present at his old home and birth place, east of Hudson, for a "home-

coming" on Saturday, October 26, 1907, as near as possible to the poet's birthday.

A special train from Hillsdale brought faculty and students, and citizens from all along the line. The following towns were represented: Coldwater, Quincy, Hillsdale, Osseo, Pittsford, Clayton, Blissfield, North Adams, Reading, Jonesville, Hudson, Adrian.

Mayors and representative citizens brought resolutions of honor and appreciation. Farmers located away from the railroad drove in from many miles, and trains made stops at the farm house during the day.

The following description of the occasion is from the pen of James O'Donnell Bennett as reported in the Chicago *Record-Herald* of Monday, October 28, 1907:

"It is a striking thing that a farming region for a radius of fifty miles should pour out its plowmen and parsons, school children and its shopkeepers to honor the man who had taught them that there was poetry in every aspect of their practical lives and the sedate landscape. Half a mile down the highway from the Carleton farm stands the stocky, box-like little white schoolhouse where the poet learned his three "R's." They call it now the "Carleton School," and a portrait of him hangs on the walls along with one of the president. A flag fluttered in the doorway. Great sprays of asparagus and red berries were the interior decorations. To this one-story, one-room structure, which stands in a lonely place at the intersection of the roads, the pilgrims repaired at 9 o'clock. In accordance with ancient district school tradition the room was insufferably hot, a sheet iron stove working overtime in the centre aisle. On the blackboard in the round, correct hand of the teacher were chalked these words:

> Boys flying kites haul in their white-winged birds;
> You can't do that way when you're flying words.
> Thoughts unexpressed may sometimes fall back dead,
> But God Himself can't kill them when they're said."

The lines were signed "Carleton."

WILL CARLETON'S SCHOOLHOUSE NEAR HUDSON

There was much speechifying at the schoolhouse, which was packed with old friends, who were called upon by President Mauck as if they still were school children. Mr. Williams, now the dignified Chicago publisher in the Fine Arts Building, was introduced as "Little Jimmy Williams who will now speak his piece."

"Bless me, bless me," he responded as he clambered on a chair. "Nobody has called me that since I was a boy out here," and he recalled how, when he and Rose Hartwick Thorpe, author of "Curfew Shall Not Ring To-night," were teaching school together in 1869, he had arranged the first programme of public readings Will Carleton had ever presented. It was for the benefit of a fund to buy an organ for the school. Mr. Carleton, when he mounted the chair, addressed the assemblage as follows:

"Fellow Pupils, and Schoolmaster and Boys and Girls—I look around this room and I pick out the places where I used to sit; sometimes it was over by that window, sometimes there, sometimes, I grieve to say, on the floor when I had been bad and was caught at it. In a general way I may say that I sought the best place and then held it down as long as I could. I have been trying to do that in life ever since."

He told how he had been larruped by the schoolmaster when he was detected writing a combination of epigram and epitaph that should embalm the failings of that long-gone pedagogue and he insisted that he never would have been caught if the rhyme for the last line had not stumped him and caused a fatal delay. A baby began to cry lustily while he was speaking and there were ominous whispers from some of the committeemen. "That kid was named after me. Don't put him out. I can talk louder than he can. It's all right."

Then he spoke of the old days and he thought they were good days, "but these are better," he said, "we must not fondle the past too much. We want to go forward. Look ahead. You'll be happier for it. Keep on the pilot of the engine if you can."

Then he recited that rich, racy old poem of his, "The Schoolmaster's Guests," and after that the Pilgrims trooped down the highway to the homestead, where there were more speeches.

This house is the original of the one Mr. Carleton describes in one of the most affecting of his poems, "Out of the Old House, Nancy; Moved Up Into the New." He incorporated it into the speech he made from the porch. The structure has been enlarged and is now a trim, white two-story dwelling with one ell. The old part is the ell and it bears its more than seventy years nobly. There you can see the rooms which once were one, for the poem says, "Kitchen, bedrooms, parlor, we had 'em—all in one." Now there is a telephone in the doorway old chief Bawbeese blessed. An iron windmill clacked sarcastically in the yard while the poet of the plain people was speaking. The turf around the house is green and firm where once stood a virgin forest. Barns and outhouses rise in the rear of the house and to-day farm wagons from all over the neighborhood are bivouacked there. Mr. and Mrs. J. Emmett Kies now farm this place for Mr. Carleton.

As he surveyed the throng around him he said:

"If I were in the habit of letting my feelings overcome me I would be crying now. If anybody else here wants to cry, however, I shall be glad to see them at it. Dear neighbors, I don't know why you should honor me today as you do by your presence here. In regard to this locality and my relations with it I don't want to be egotistical, but I know that is what you want me to talk about. I had a father—a mighty good one, too—and if it were he whom you met to honor you would understand it. Maybe he's here today. I hope he is.

"My sweet mother, I used to think, lived in two worlds at one time, here and in heaven. But her religion was cheery and helpful. Night after night she was with the sick—not as a trained nurse, except as love and duty and devotion trained her—not as a paid nurse except as God was her paymaster.

"Three years ago my wife, who I pray could have lived to see this day, went away to a better land, and on her tomb in

Greenwood we carved the words, 'She made home her palace.' So I stand here the last of my race.

"Friends, this spot is very dear, very sacred to me. From where I stand the throne of grace has been invoked not 1,000 times, not 5,000 nor 10,000, but as I compute it 30,000. And so I say to you that great influences are hovering here, teaching us still that unless our hands take hold on the world above, out feet can find no firm foundation in this world we inhabit here."

He closed by reciting "Out of the Old House, Nancy," for them and then there was great handshaking and album signing and good old-fashioned visits and the singing of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

Thus was the poet of the farm crowned by the people of Michigan with the maple leaves of gold and scarlet that he loves. They did it because he has added something to the body of poetry that all the world knows and has committed to the heart of memory.

The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society has had opportunity to express personal appreciation of the poet of the pioneers. In response to a request from the society, Mr. Carleton gave an address at its annual meeting in Lansing, on the evening of June 8, 1910, which was thus reported, in the "State Republican" the following day:

"Will Carleton is what some people would call a natural poet, in that his poetry has nothing to do with what he would call the 'high falutin' aspects of life. This is the idea one gets from his poetry and that is the idea that he gives when seen in person. His talk before the Michigan Pioneer and Historical society Wednesday evening brought this year's session to a pleasing and fitting close. He talked of Michigan folks and ways and recited several of his Michigan poems in so entertaining a manner that an uncomfortably large audience sat, stood and perched around the senate chamber for two hours in order to catch every word he said.

"'I am glad of the opportunity to talk before the Michigan

Pioneer and Historical society and am well fitted to speak about the early days,' said Mr. Carleton. 'I know all about the pioneer days, I know all about the hardships of those times and I know all about the wilderness and its dangers. My father told me.' "

Mr. Carleton went on to tell about his early experiences as a pupil and a teacher in a district school and in the course of his talk recited such favorite selections from his own works as 'Elder Lamb's Donation Party,' 'The District School,' 'The Old Log House,' and 'Over the Hill to the Poor House,' to the great delight of his audience. Besides these he took occasion to introduce some small exposition of his philosophy of life."

That Carleton had a message for his readers, and that he wrote for their sympathy and friendship, is clearly seen in his preface to the "City Legends" (1889), as follows:

"It will be noticed that these Legends are divided into seven different Chains. Whether the links of dialogue and interlude with which they are connected be gold, silver, or base metal, the author will not say—he really does not pretend to know. Whether the pendants of poems that hang from them be diamonds, pearls, rubies, or worthless paste, how can he guarantee? Literary jewelry (if poetry may be so called) depends largely for its value upon the eyes that gaze upon it and the hearts that wear it.

The real preface to this book is formed by those which have preceded it from the same author; a like purpose actuates them all. But he takes another opportunity to thank his large family of readers for their continued faithfulness and loyalty, and to assure them that he is still laboring to deserve their respect and affection."

Harper's Weekly, in which the early "Farm Ballads" appeared in 1871, and to which Carleton occasionally contributed poems and articles in prose throughout his life, has this to say of him in its number for December 28, 1912, the next issue after his death:

"With the passing of Will Carleton, America loses the most

WILL CARLETON'S HOME NEAR HUDSON

popular of her poets and the one whose writings have been more widely read and appreciated than those of any poet since the days of Whittier and Longfellow. There is hardly an English-speaking home in America—it might almost be said in the English-speaking world—where 'Over the Hill to the Poorhouse' and 'Betsey and I Are Out' are unknown. Will Carleton's works still command heavy sales, and selections from his poems have long ago been incorporated into popular anthologies. As a lecturer Carleton was well known throughout this country, and if he occupied a comparatively small space in the columns of the periodical press it was because he had been known so long that he had been accepted as an institution. He was little discussed because he had passed into history.....

"Will Carleton had a happy knack of attracting the reader by the simplicity of his themes and their pathetic or humorous appeal. His poem, 'The Sandalmaker of Babylon,' which appeared in Harper's Weekly as long ago as 1889, was reprinted in this publication, by request, in the issue of October 28, 1911."

To settle any question as to lack of cordiality in the relations between Messrs. Harper and Bros. and Mr. Carleton during late years on account of his publications being issued by the Everywhere Publishing Co., let me quote the following letter received from Harper and Bros. under the date of February 2, 1914:

"Dear Sir:

"Your letter of the 31st ultimo is at hand.

"In reply, we hasten to assure you that, as we wrote you, our relations with Mr. Will Carleton were uninterrupted until his death. There was nothing but cordial feeling on both sides. He was frank and straightforward in his dealings, honorable in his business transactions and highly appreciative of similar treatment on the part of others. He had, we thought, a high sense of business honor. We hold him in respect, and we believe that he entertained the same feeling toward us.

"Very truly yours,

"Harper & Brothers."

Like all great master spirits who have risen above their surroundings to stand as types of their people and to voice their moods and feelings, their actuals and their ideals, Carleton was not alone the embodiment of his own genius, but the product of his age and environment. The farmer-pioneers needed a voice to sing the exaltation of their homely life—and he responded. From their own body came the singer, with their heart-throbs bursting into song.

Michigan should not, and shall not, forget her poet. In Monroe County we have named a village after him, and there are "Carleton" reading clubs. Though the farmer pioneers shall pass away, their children and their children's children will cherish the memory of him who sang their struggles and their aspirations. It will be the good fortune of the school children of Michigan, of whom Carleton was one, to hold dear the memory, and to honor the example, of the poet who proved the value of an education and devoted it to the service of his fellow people.

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